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GRECO- ROMAN

CIVILIZATION



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

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GRECO- ROMAN

EARLY EXPERIMENTS IN
PARTICIPATORY GOVERNMENT

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

Athens and Rome allowed some male citizens to take part in government. At the time, most other places were ruled by a single person. This new type of republic lasted about 170 years in Athens and 480 years in Rome.

Deep time

Today, Greece and Italy are neighbors along the northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Eight-five million years ago they were neighbors across the sea. They once sat along the coast of Africa. Plate tectonics pushed them into Europe. This created the Alps and the mountains of Greece.

The area became the setting for two important ancient civilizations: the Greeks and the Romans.

Location and food

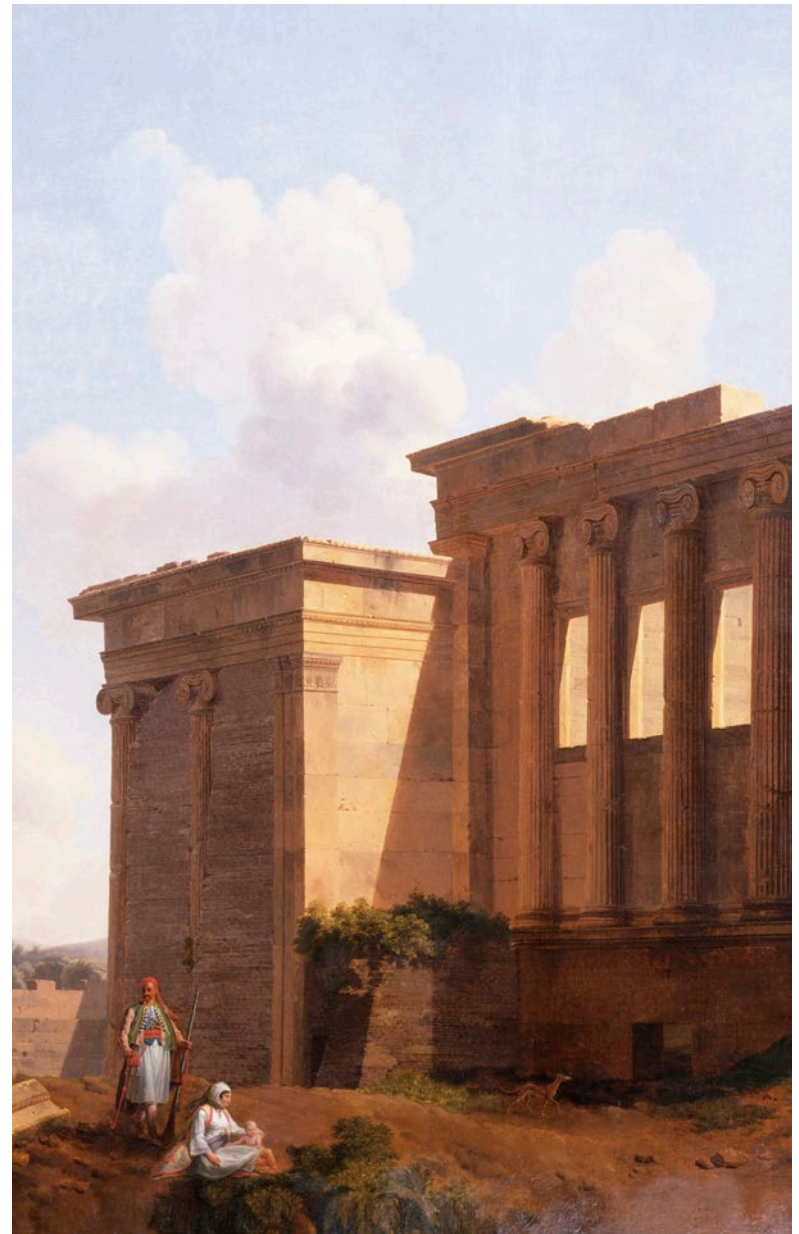
The Greeks lived on the southern shoreline of the Greek peninsula. The area was called Attica. The Macedonians lived to the north. Attica had rocky soil on steep mountains.

Because the soil was poor, the Greeks had limited food options. They grew barley, grapes, olive trees, figs, and lentils. They also raised sheep and goats. The Greeks stayed near the coast so they could fish and trade with other groups.

Athens was built near the southern coast of Attica. A large silver mine near the city made Athenians very rich. They used their money to buy wood from Italy. The wood went to build warships for the city's powerful navy.

The site of Rome was more productive. Rome began on seven hills near the Tiber River on the Italian peninsula. Rome wasn't along the seashore. It was 18 miles, or 30 kilometers, inland. This gave Rome protection from naval attacks. And the Romans could still access the Mediterranean Sea by river.

Early Romans grew wheat, barley, oats, rye, grapes, and olives in their fertile river valley. They used goat's and sheep's milk for cheese. Their local fruit trees included apples, pears, plums, and quince. They harvested many vegetables, but not corn, potatoes, or tomatoes. Those came later from the



A painting of the Temple of Athena (Minerva to the Romans) in Athens, Greece



A Greek silver coin from about 160 BCE

Americas. For meat, they had fish, oysters, chickens, ducks, geese, and pigs; they seldom ate cows. Salt could be found in certain places. It was very valuable and was controlled by the government. Soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. Our word “salary” comes from this practice. So does the phrase “worth your salt.”

Athens and Greece

Before the Greeks, the Mycenaean lived on the Greek peninsula. They attacked Troy, a city in Anatolia (now Turkey). Troy was on the other side of the Aegean Sea. This war is described in *The Iliad*, one of the earliest written pieces of Western literature. *The Iliad*, by Homer, was written down around the 700s BCE.

By 800 BCE, small city-states were forming in the mountains of southern Greece. Each city state had about 500 to 5,000 male citizens. The total Greek population may have been two to three million. The city-states shared a common language and religion. After 776 BCE, they came together every four years for competitive games held near Mount Olympus. Greece introduced metal coins in the seventh century BCE to make trade easier. The early Greeks used their large population to expand by colonization.

Sparta and Athens were the most powerful city-states in early Greece. Their culture and politics were very different. The Spartans conquered their neighbors and forced them to live as slaves. Sparta developed a strict culture based on maintaining an elite military force. The Spartans were ruled by a council of 28 elders.

Athens was more democratic. It gave political rights to wealthy men. If a man could afford armor and weapons to serve in the army, he was allowed to participate in the government. By 450 BCE, public officeholders were chosen randomly. Even the 10 military generals were elected. In Athens, women, children, slaves, and foreigners didn't have political rights. Only 10 to 12 percent of the 300,000 Athenians were allowed to participate in government.

In 500 BCE, the Persian Empire was the largest and wealthiest agrarian civilization. It began to conquer some Greek colonies. But when the Athenians fought the Persians, the Athenians won. They were victorious on land at Marathon in 490 BCE and in great sea battles.

A runner named Phidippides carried the news of victory 26 miles from Marathon to Athens. He arrived, shouting, “Rejoice, we conquer.” Shortly after, he died. Before that, he had run 140 miles to Sparta and back, asking for help. For religious reasons the Spartans wouldn't give any help until the Moon was full. Phidippides's run 2,500 years ago inspired the 26.2-mile marathon races that are so popular today.



An illustration of the Greeks attacking a Persian ship

After the victory over the Persians, Athens enjoyed a golden age. For the next 150 years, Athens experienced a period of cultural creativity. Under the elected general Pericles, democratic participation was at a high point.

Through trade, Athens received knowledge and ideas from Mesopotamia and Egypt. Scientists, philosophers, and playwrights developed and combined cultural traditions. Their works would later spread through Europe. They would serve as the foundation of Western culture. Just for reference: the philosophers Socrates died in 399 BCE, Plato about 348 BCE, and Aristotle in 322 BCE.

Still, most Greeks at the time did not have an advanced education. The literacy rate for that time is estimated at about 5 percent. The more educated Greeks believed in a group of gods, headed by the sky god, Zeus. (See the Greek origin story in Unit 1.) Many Greeks believed in mystery religions, which involved secrets known only to members. These religions often taught of a savior who died and was resurrected. When he rose from the dead, his followers would be saved.

The Greek city-states never figured out how to live together peacefully. Instead, Athens and Sparta fought the Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE). In it, Athens was defeated and all city-states were weakened.

In the mid-300s BCE, northern neighbor Macedonia conquered the Greek city-states. After Macedonian leader Philip II was assassinated, his 20-year-old son Alexander took over. In 13 amazing years, Alexander conquered enough land to form the largest empire the world had seen. He became known as Alexander the Great.

Alexander died suddenly and mysteriously in 323 BCE after a wild party. His empire was divided among three of his generals. Egypt went to Ptolemy – not to be confused with the scientist Claudius Ptolemy. Greece and Macedonia fell under the rule of Antigonos. Central Asia was ruled by Seleucus.

For more than a hundred years, these Greek rulers brought Greek culture to areas they controlled. For example, the city of Alexandria became the most important port in the Mediterranean. The city sits on the coast of Egypt. Rulers there funded a museum that served as an institute of higher learning and research. It included a library that had about 700,000 scrolls. Scholars came from around the Mediterranean to study in Alexandria.

It was in Alexandria that Eratosthenes measured the diameter of the Earth. It was there that Euclid wrote the rules of geometry. And it was there that the scientist Ptolemy wrote the *Almagest*.

Meanwhile, the Romans had developed a powerful agrarian civilization on the Italian peninsula. This one was not fragmented into city-states. Between 215 and 146 BCE, they gradually conquered the Greek cities in Italy. In the process, the Romans absorbed much of Greek culture into their own.

Rome and empire

Rome began as small towns on seven hilltops by the Tiber River. The towns combined to form Rome. A hundred years later, Roman aristocrats overthrew the king and set up a republic ruled by the elites. A republic is a form of government where delegates represent the interests of the people. The poorer classes insisted on some protections and participation. The idea of the republic came to include the rule of law, the rights of citizens, and moral behavior.

Rome expanded as its population grew. Roman armies fought the powerful city of Carthage across the Mediterranean. They fought Carthage for various reasons — food supplies, defense, land, glory. After more than 100 years of fighting, Roman armies finally won. They went on to conquer Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East by 133 BCE.

The republican form of government produced intense rivalries among its military leaders. These leaders competed for power with their personal armies. Julius Caesar emerged as the winner of this competition. He conquered England and Gaul, now known as France.

Julius Caesar declared himself dictator for life. This act ended the republic. Two years later Caesar was stabbed to death by members of the Senate. They hoped to restore the republic. Instead, 13 years of civil war followed. After that, Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, or Augustus, took over and ruled for 45 years.

The Roman Empire reached its height in the first two centuries of the Common Era. The time from 27 BCE to 180 CE is known as the "Pax Romana," or Roman peace.

Rome was a city of one million people. But its leaders controlled about 130 million people across an area of about 1.5 million square miles. Roman roads linked all parts of the empire. Roman law was enforced throughout the empire. It featured concepts such as "innocent until proven guilty."

Men had most of the rights under Roman law. This was also true in Greece. The father of a Roman family could arrange the marriages of his children or sell them into slavery. He could even kill them without punishment. Roman law limited women's rights to inherit property and money.

Romans used slave labor like all agrarian civilizations of the time. Historians think that at the height of the empire perhaps one-third of the population were slaves. An emperor alone might have about 20,000 slaves.

In 73 BCE, an escaped slave, Spartacus, assembled 70,000 slaves. They rebelled. After several years Roman troops crushed them. The troops crucified 6,000 survivors along the Appian Way.

The Greeks had focused on philosophy and science. The Romans put their creativity into roads, aqueducts for carrying water, and law.

In a way, the Roman Empire helped to spread Greek culture. The Romans honored many gods, renaming the Greek ones and taking them as their own. Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero adopted Greek Stoicism. This philosophy tried to identify moral standards based on nature and reason. The older mystery religions were very popular in the Roman Empire.

The rise of Christianity

In a remote corner of the Roman Empire, a small religious sect emerged. It was Christianity, now the world's most widespread religion.

The Romans conquered Judea (modern Israel) in 6 CE. It was a time of great tension between the Roman overlords and their Jewish subjects. Jesus grew up in the middle of that tension. To Christians, he is the Son of God. The Romans allowed Jesus to be crucified in the early 30s CE. They believed Jesus was calling for rebellion with his message that "the kingdom of God is at hand."

In 66–70, the Jews actually did revolt against Roman rule. The Romans crushed the revolt. They destroyed the Jewish temple and took thousands of Jews to Rome as slaves. Most of the rest were sent into exile.

After this revolt, Christianity spread to non-Jewish communities, led by Paul of Tarsus. Paul preached in the Greek-speaking eastern regions of the Roman Empire. At first Rome mistreated Christians. Yet, by the 200s, Rome had become the center of Church authority.

Christianity appealed to the lower classes, women, and city dwellers. In 313, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity after he converted. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity was the official state religion.

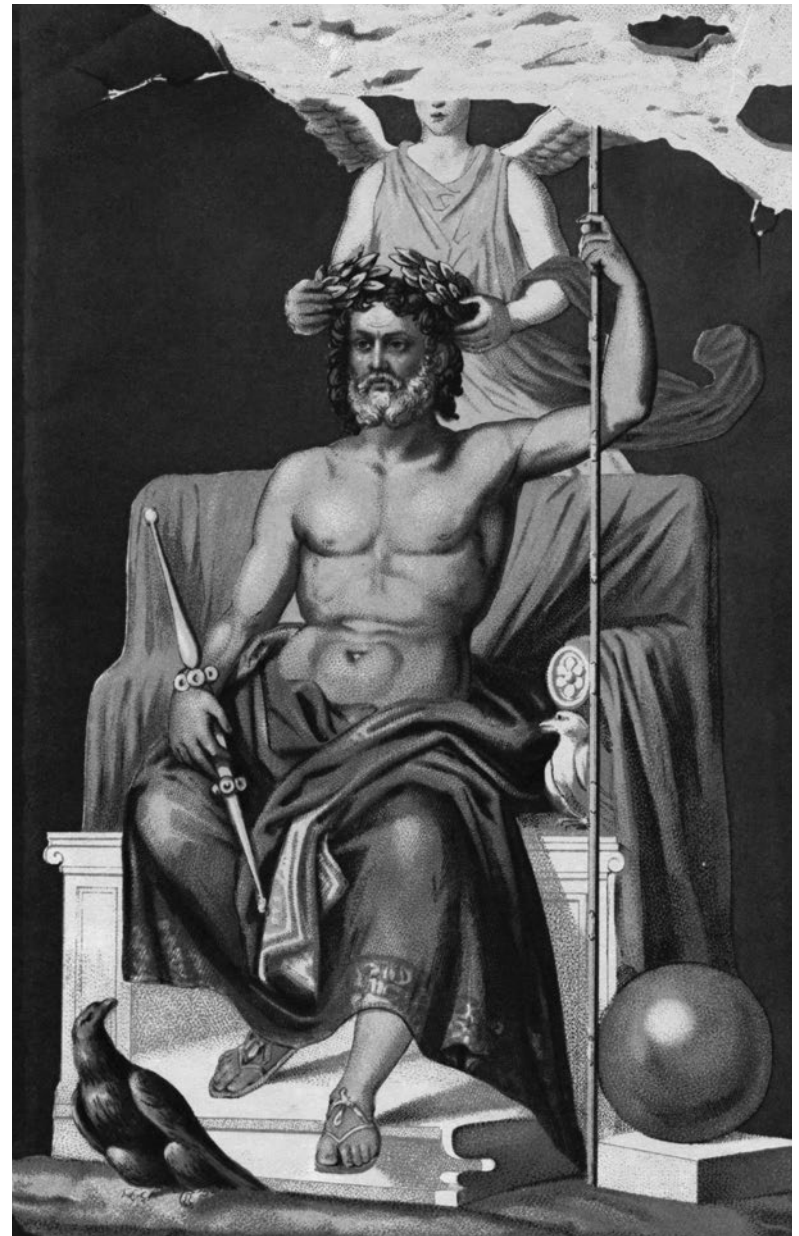
The fall of Rome

History books used to refer to the “fall” of Rome in 476. This was when a Germanic general took over the western part of the empire. But the fall of Rome was a gradual breaking up of an empire. It didn’t collapse suddenly.

After 200, Rome faced many problems. The empire lacked strong leadership. During a 50-year span in the 200s, there were 26 emperors. Most died violent deaths.

Disease spread by trade devastated Roman cities. Sickesses that began in animals like smallpox, measles, mumps and whooping cough spread rapidly in cities. The Roman world lost about one-quarter of its population before 450. People lost confidence in coins because of inflation. They returned to bartering (trading).

In 324, Emperor Constantine moved the capital to Byzantium, in Turkey. Byzantium was later renamed Constantinople, then Istanbul. The Eastern Roman Empire became the Byzantine Empire. It lasted another thousand years until the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople in 1453.



Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans) being crowned by Victory

The Western Roman Empire ended in 476. Central authority broke down. Smaller regions became independent city-states again. These were ruled by princes, bishops, or the pope. The common tongue had been Latin. Now it evolved into many splinter languages — French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian.

Connections and legacies

Greco-Roman collective learning survived even after the Roman empire collapsed. A lot of credit goes to the Ptolemaic rulers in Egypt. They supported scholarship at the Library of Alexandria. Nobody knows for sure what happened to Alexandria's library, but it eventually disappeared.



Three main claims have been made about the library's destruction. One was that Julius Caesar set part of the city on fire in 48 BCE when fighting his rival general, Pompey. Another claims that Christians destroyed it in the early 400s CE. A third says that Muslims raided the library and burned the documents. In 640, the Muslims took control of Alexandria.

Muslim scholars became interested in Greek ideas. These scholars spread their learning across North Africa and into Spain. In the eleventh century, Latin Christians took Toledo and Sicily back from the Muslims, and southern Italy from the Byzantines. In the process, they acquired many manuscripts written by Greek and Muslim scholars and monks.

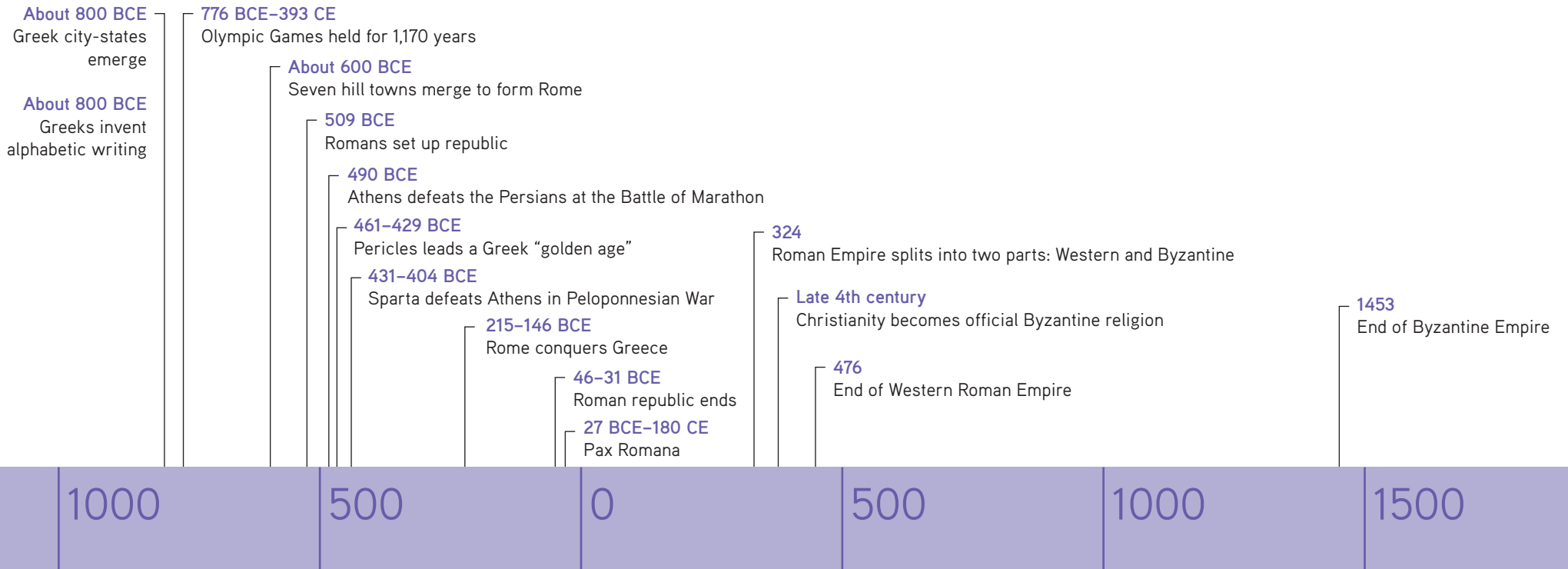
In the twelfth century, the Muslim scholar Ibn Rushd wrote commentaries on the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He also translated Aristotle's work into Arabic. By 1300, universities had been organized in many European cities. These allowed Greco-Roman ideas to enter European intellectual life.

Byzantine Empire scholars also played a large role in preserving Greek knowledge. Scholarship eventually disappeared in the western part of the former Roman Empire. When that happened, Byzantine monks and scholars copied the Greek manuscripts.

The Roman legacy is a bit more concrete. Hundreds of miles of Roman road still exist, after 2,000 years of use. Emperor Justinian reorganized Roman law with the Code of Justinian. It remains the basis of legal systems in most of Europe. (U.S. law is based on English case law.) Humanists in Europe used the ideas of Roman non-Christians to discuss how to live well without arguing about religion. The names of our months also come from Roman times. They still carry the names of Roman gods and of a couple of their most famous leaders.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Greco-Roman civilization is its experiments with citizen participation in political life. These exercises seem short-lived in both societies. But the ideas of democracy later reemerged in Europe and the young United States. The Greek and Roman ideas of democracy still play a role in shaping governments today.

Greco-Roman timeline



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A Greek silver coin from about 160 BCE
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